

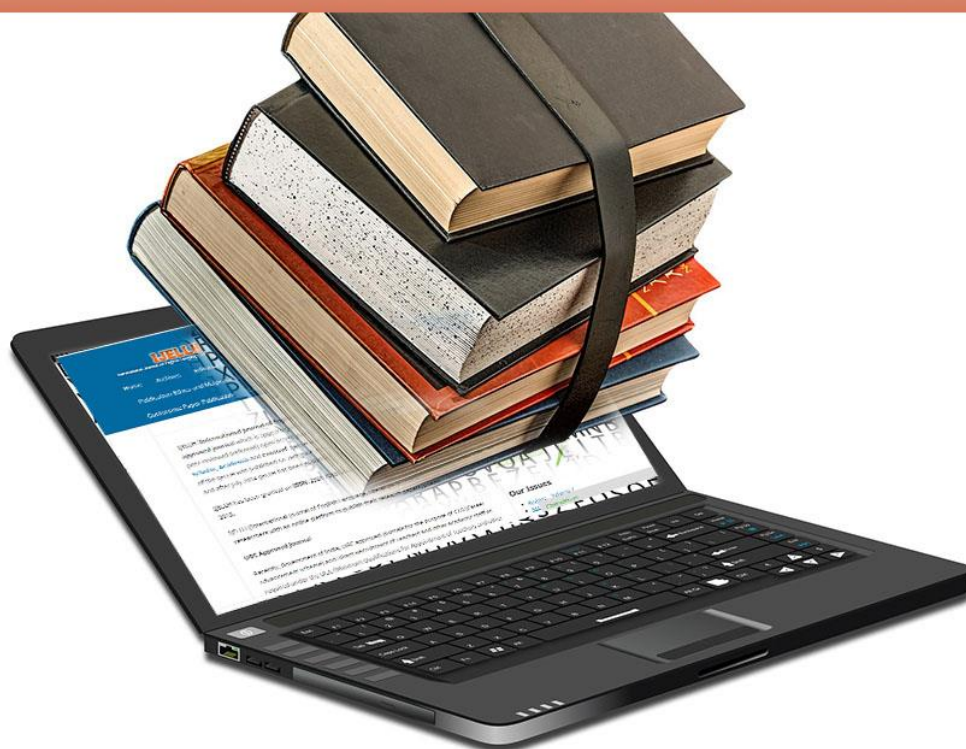
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Transformation of Ethics and Morality of Diaspora in the Mauritian Narrative

Abstract

The human civilization shows the dynamic aspect of migration that has taken place all along our existence. In present context of the migration limits itself within the realm of boundaries of inter or intrastate based on the outcome of industrial revolution and creation of republics during European Renaissance. The colonization and the freedom struggle show the national as well as individual aspiration. “The Republic” of Plato has a great intrinsic influence directly or indirectly in shaping our religion, culture and morality. Hence our conscience and behavioral patterns, literature, religion, culture and morality share similar as well as different facets of social realism and language reflection on the society. Now we can say diaspora/migration has itself multiple meanings. According to Cohen, a diaspora is considered as an ethnic group that has moved away and dispersed from an original homeland to a foreign area or country (Cohen, 2008). The Inter dependable and complicated relationship between our literature culture and morality cannot separate from each other. Mauritian literature is represented as a source of social conflict, racial discrimination, as well as ethnic and domestic violence.

So we have undertaken the work of Ananda Devi which reflects the changing nature of above elements in vivid style/manner. Ananda Devi is a literary prolific, a Mauritian born francophone writer who focuses on the exploitation, confinement and the plight of the female subject within the patriarchal Indian and Mauritian cultures in her narratives. The writing of Ananda Devi shows a transforming pattern of Religion, Culture and Morality.

Key words: Ananda Devi, woman, identity, violation of culture, religion and morality

The transcolonial trajectory that the novel follows—from Mauritius to India via France; and from French to English, with incursions of Creole and Hindi—symbolically reflects the complex and competing colonial histories, and post-colonial cultural legacies, of both the French and British in India and beyond. The publication of a novel by an Indo-Mauritian author gestures towards the foundational connections established, under British rule, between India and Mauritius, and hence the enduring, postcolonial, diasporic links connecting their respective, current-day populations.

Contemporary Mauritian narratives, as the society from which it is generated, is a rich and complex mix of diverse linguistic and cultural influences. With no original, in-dwelling inhabitants, Mauritius's population is composed of the descendants of French colonial settlers, African and Malagasy slaves, Indian indentured labourers, Chinese traders and economic migrants from across the globe, with each successive wave of immigrants leaving its mark on the languages, cultures and customs of this small, postcolonial 'rainbow nation'. Mauritius has a history of dual colonisation because it was settled first by the French (from 1715 to 1810) and, later, by the British (from 1810 until independence in 1968). Both former colonial languages continue to occupy important but discreet roles in modern-day Mauritius's multilingual reality, alongside the ubiquitously spoken Creole and a plethora of 'ancestral' languages.

Language politics and ethnic identity are hotly contested and inextricably linked in a nation in which, as Patrick Eisenlhor contends, ‘full membership (...) is performed through the cultivation of ancestral traditions with origins elsewhere’ (Eisenlhor 2006, 5). Often occluded tensions and inequalities between the population’s constituent ethnic groups—particularly between the majority Hindu Mauritians, descendants of Indian indentured labourers, and the minority, Creole community, descendants of African and Malagasy slaves—simmer beneath the surface of the official, multi-cultural rhetoric of ‘unity in diversity.’ Mauritian narrative, written predominantly in French¹ already shares many characteristics with the practice of translation, as authors seek to negotiate the complex network of relations between the different languages and cultures of the island, and to convey this complexity to their many non-Mauritian readers. The translation—or, as in the particular case to be discussed here, the self-translation—of Mauritian fiction thus offers particularly fertile ground for an investigation of the many, overlapping and competing, transcultural influences at play in notions of the ‘postcolonial.’

Ananda Devi was born on 23 March 1957 in Trois-Boutiques, Mauritius, an island particularly notable for its confluence of diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities. A descendent from Andhra Pradesh in India on her mother’s side, and Creole on her father’s, conversant in Telegu, Creole, French, and English, as well as Bhojpuri and Hindi, Devi in many ways encapsulates both the hybridity of Mauritian culture and the singularity of the individual Mauritian. Indeed, as she herself has stated in an interview with Patrick Sultan in December 2001, and to which her literature often testifies, to be Mauritian is always to be both multiple and particular: ‘faire partie de tous ces mondes, et à travers un processus de synthèse et de syncrétisme, en extraire quelque chose de neuf et d’authentique’.

¹ While English is the language of politics and the judiciary, French remains the dominant language of literature, culture and the media in Mauritius. There are also small but growing literatures, published with local presses, in Creole, Hindi and English.

Displaying a prodigious writing talent, Devi won her first literary prize at the age of fifteen for a short story in a Radio France Internationale competition. She went on to concentrate on ethnology and anthropology over the next few years, her studies culminating in a doctoral thesis at the School for Oriental and African Studies in London. In the meantime, Devi continued to develop her literary career, working as a translator and publishing a collection of short stories, *Solstices*, in the late 1970s. During the 1980s and 1990s, Devi's primary focus returned to literature, and she produced a handful of texts through Indian Ocean and African publishing houses, including her first novel *Rue la Poudrière*.

After a few years spent in Congo-Brazzaville, Devi moved to Ferney-Voltaire in Switzerland in 1989, publishing *Le Voile de Draupadi* (The Draupadi's Veil) and *L'Arbre fouet* (The Whip Tree) with L'Harmattan in the 1990s, and *Moi, l'interdite* (Me, the forbidden) with Dapper in 2000. With an increasing readership, both popular and academic, across the French-speaking world, Devi's next novel *Pagli* was published in 2001 in Gallimard's 'Continents noirs' collection. The beginning of the millennium proved a particularly productive time for Devi, with *Soupir* (Sigh), *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* (The life of Joséphin the crazy), and the collection of poetry, *Le Long Désir* (The Long Desire), following in quick succession. Her next novel, *Ève de ses décombres* (Eve of her rubble) was met with tremendous critical acclaim followed by *IndianTango* and *Le Sari Vert* (The green Sari).

The island of Mauritius acts as a backdrop to the majority of Devi's texts and she is particularly interested in exploring the experience of alterity within the confines of the Indo-Mauritian world. Above all, her work considers the construction and confinement of femininity in such a society from varying positions of marginality and liminality – among them, madness, trauma, illness, disability, prostitution, adultery and homosexuality. Despite her focus on representations of suffering and the struggle for autonomy – and at times examples of extreme

violence and destruction – Devi’s writing is generally characterised by an intimate poetic and lyrical style. Equally, the social realities that are brought to the fore are often framed within narratives that draw upon fantastical and poetical elements that serve to displace identity, temporality and narrative representation. Devi’s writing has been translated into several languages, though to date only *Pagli* is available in English translation (translated by Devi herself). Currently, Devi lives and writes in Switzerland, and is considered to be one of the most important and exciting francophone Mauritian writers on the contemporary scene.

In the works of Ananda Devi, all her protagonists, mostly women, are in some way mad, deformed, mute, abnormal, or deviant, and they live in complete or partial isolation, recounting stories of pain, suffering, and despair. The first of Devi’s novels to be published by Gallimard, *Pagli* marked the author’s rise to relative international prominence, often being read as representative of Mauritian literature and society more broadly. Set in a highly fictionalised, modern-day Mauritius, The protagonist Daya in the “**Pagli**” is mad and ostracised by society. The protagonist of *Pagli* searching for her identity, rebels against the society, her family and religion which marginalise her and deny her right to make decisions about her own life. *Pagli* symbolically rediscovers her true name.

Pagli tells the story of Indo-Mauritian girl Daya, the eponymous ‘pagli’ (meaning ‘mad woman’ in both Hindi and Mauritian Creole). She married against her will to the cousin who had raped her at the age of thirteen. She undergoes the trauma of an arranged marriage with her brutal cousin. She accepts the marriage only to exact her revenge. Her cousin had desacrilized her body without her consent and love, Daya, in turn desacrilizes the institution of marriage.

In her ceremonial robe, Daya sits in front of the divine fire listening to the pandit recite his prayers for the union of the couple and the prayers for the bride promising to fulfill her wifely

duties. With all revenge and pain, she refuses defiantly to chant the prayers. She recites very wildly her own prayers of resistance and defiance. Daya humiliates her cousin publicly and desecrilizes their union.

“ J’aurai toujours le courage de dire non. Je garderai en mémoire le souvenir de ma douleur. Je garderai cet homme droit dans les yeux avec la certitude de ma haine . Je ne rejoindrai pas le chemin tracé de femme d’’épouse de mere et de belle- mère.”²(pg.75)

During the marriage ceremony, Pagli made her first transgression by repeating in an aside the oath of the young wife in Creole and not in Hindi, which would be shocking for the members of the Hindu community. After the wedding night, her husband starts to be afraid of her. It is she who dominates and who dictates the rules. Pagli, seeking revenge, gets naked in front of her husband and defies him:

“Regarde ce corps que tu ne toucheras plus jamais. Regarde ce qui t’est à présent interdit. Regarde ces lieux sombres et touffus. Regarde ces endroits que tu ne visiteras jamais. Regarde ces formes qui ont bien changé depuis le jour lointain où tu les as massacrées. Regarde ce dont tu vas rêver pour le res- tant de tes jours et qui ne t’appartiendra pas. Regarde ce ventre qui ne portera pas d’enfant de toi”³(pg.78)

This scene of symbolic castration of her husband and reversal of roles is decisive in the revolt of the woman. In the conservative and phallocratic society where women are deprived of their

² Translation: "I'll always have the courage to say no. I will remember the memory of my pain. I will keep this man straight in the eye with the certainty of my hatred. I will not join the path of wife of mother and mother-in-law. "

³ "Look at this body that you will never touch again. Look at what is now banned. Look at these dark and bushy places. Look at those places you will never visit. Look at these forms that have changed since the distant day when you massacred them. Look what you will dream for the rest of your life and that will not belong to you. Look at this belly that will not bear a child of you".

rights such dissent is unthinkable. Vicram Ramharai thinks that "Daya [Pagli] recognizes his infidelity. Sexuality serves here to threaten the hegemony of men. The identity of women is associated with sexual power "(2011b: 75). Daya also refuses to conform to the traditional roles of a wife and homekeeper. She daringly denies all her familial duties and responsibilities. Daya strongly rejects not only to cooking but also to the traditional and ethical roles of wife and daughter-in-law.

*“ Moi qui laisse bruler le riz parcequ ej” aime cette odeur d” amertume...,
moi qui fais tomber au milieu du silence des après-midi les lourdes marmites
en fonte pour le plaisir d” entendre cet oura gan de metal qui se proplonge
longtemps dans l” air immobile ... ”⁴(pg.23)*

By choosing his individual identity, Pagli opposes his social role from the outside by society and its parents who have accomplished "their duty ". She does not behave like other women in her in-laws and those around her who call her crazy. In seeking to annoy them, Pagli calls them in Creole "mofines" (bearers of misfortune).

*Les mofines ne sont pas des femmes ordinaires. Ou plutôt, elles ne sont pas
des femmes du tout. [...] Elles sont là pour produire et créer la descen- dance
héroïque qu’elles ont reçu l’ordre de perpétuer. [...] Perdant très vite le sens
de leur destinée afin de mieux porter leurs chaînes. Imprégnées de cette
charge, elles cessent un jour d’être mères ou femmes pour devenir les soldats
de la pureté et promener leurs ailes d’acier au-dessus de chaque ombre
mena- çant de s’échapper.(pg.41)*

⁴ Translation: "I let the rice burn because I love this smell of bitterness ... I, who drop the heavy cast iron pots in the middle of the afternoon's silence for the pleasure of hearing this story of metal that is propelled for a long time in the still air.."

Daya finds happiness in a love affair with Zil, a Creole (that is, Afro-Mauritian) fisherman. When the couple's adultery is discovered, the *mofines* lock Daya in a chicken coop, as a cyclone and a corresponding tide of inter-ethnic violence sweep across the island, and it is from this position of incarceration that Daya retrospectively recounts her story and imagines an alternative existence, free from societal constraints and racial prejudices. Daya ignores all the accusatory words of the society and frequents Mitsy's home.

*“ Je rentre au bercail , fille maudite comme toutes les filles qui se refusent ”*⁵

(pg.66)

Daya continues to disrupt the sanctity of traditions and cultures. She dreams of her extramarital life with Zil, her love. It is the love for Zil which gives her the tonic and spirit for her existence. Zil is the mirror where she admires her look and life. It is Zil who awakens and ignites her passion and female desire.

*“ ...tu es mon miroir dans lequel je me vois belle... ”(83) “ Je veux que tu me reclaims, que tu m'exiges. Dis-moi : Tu es à moi. Ce ne serait qu'une vérité. Je le suis. A toi. ”(89)*⁶

Daya experiences a complete mental collapse as she is overwhelmed by a destructive madness leading to both a spiritual and a physical non-being, as not only does she become mad, she rejects Hindu society and she dies at the end of the novel. Centring as it does on the forbidden sexual relationship between a Mauritian woman, descended from Indian indentured labourers, and a Mauritian man, descended from African slaves, the narrative is haunted by the fraught and often silenced issues of Mauritius's traumatic historic past and its ethnically-divided present issues.

⁵ Translation: "I return to the fold, girl cursed like all the girls who refuse"

⁶ Translation : you are my mirror in which I see myself beautiful ... "(83)" I want you to claim me, that you require me. Tell me, you are mine. It would only be a truth. I'm. To you. "(89)

Daya-Pagli, the eponymous character of Pagli (2001) highlights the problems surrounding the negotiation of identity in the society depicted by Ananda Devi. Her yearning for a single identity stems from the inability to construct a stable and coherent Self because of the complex notion of belonging(s) that is prevalent in Mauritian society. Indeed, as the narrator describes the ‘mofines’, the guardians of Hindu traditions in Pagli, the notion of attachment to India is highlighted as Daya-Pagli is burdened with her Indian ancestors’ will. In her own words:

*“elles ont tissé des liens entre ces gens venus d’ailleurs et moi”*⁷(Pg: 42),

She does not recognise their values as her own nor does she think she owes them anything: *‘je n’avais fait aucun serment d’allégeance à tant d’inconnus’*⁸(pg 43). Daya-Pagli, in the text, remains the only Hindu woman who does not follow the *‘sentier tracé pour [elle]’* (pg.41). The notion of belonging is complicated because Daya-Pagli lives in her own present and seeks a future with a man she loves. Conscious of herself as an inhabitant of an island rather than the Indian sub-continent, she repeatedly denounces the insistence on clear boundaries being maintained between the different communities on the island, since the man she loves is Creole,⁹ that is of mixed African descent: *‘la Pagli et Zil. L’entrave. La transgression. La petite faille qui deviendra grande’*¹⁰ [...] (P: 106).

Pagli also highlights an interesting aspect of Mauritian society, namely the attachment of Indians to their ancestral ‘home’, prompting some researchers to refer to the island as ‘Little India’, given that the population is 70% of Indian origin.¹¹ However, Mauritian society is

⁷ Translation: “They have forged links between these people from elsewhere and me”

⁸ Translation: “I had not sworn allegiance to so many strangers”

⁹ According to Hugh Tinker, ‘The term ‘Creole’ is employed with very different meanings. Originally, it meant persons born in the sugar colony, whose ancestors came from France (by contrast to those who were actually immigrants from France). Very soon a local man of pure French descent was distinguished as ‘un créole français’. The general term ‘créole’ was applied to persons of mixed descent who followed the Catholic religion even though they were also descended from slaves or ‘free men of colour’. Gradually, the term was extended to all Mauritians: except the Indians’ (Tinker 1977: 324). Nowadays, however, only those of mixed African descent are referred to as Creoles in Mauritius.

¹⁰ Translation: The hindrance. The transgression. The little girl who will grow up

¹¹ Indeed, Patrick Eisenlohr’s study of diaspora in Mauritian society is entitled ‘Little India’ (2006)

multicultural and multilinguistic. It has been referred to as a 'hybrid' space by a few critics: Peter Hawkins includes it in his *The Other Hybrid Archipelago* (2007), for example. 'Other' in Hawkins's title refers to the Caribbean, from where theories of *métissage* and 'Créolité' have emanated. In Mauritius, the population is a mix of descendants of mostly French colonizers, African slaves, Indian indentured labourers (Hindus and Muslims) as well as Chinese traders, who have all lived together in relative harmony since the colonial period.

Culturally speaking, there are different ethnic groups that each has a public holiday attributed to them in an attempt at showing equal rights for all communities. Similarly, there is proportional representation in the National Assembly, 'So, no matter what the result by party in the general election, this guarantees seats for ethnic minorities such as the Chinese and Muslims' (Srebrenik 2002: 278). This system has been criticised by Hansraj Mathur who asserts that it involves the 'constitutionalisation' of ethnicity (Mathur 1997: 60- 4), which exacerbates the existing divide between the different communities on the island. Nevertheless, each community tends to participate in the cultural festivals of the other and as such it is not uncommon to find Creoles celebrating Cavadee, the Tamil religious festival, and many people, who are not necessarily North Indians, walking to Ganga Talao for Maha Shivaratree, while members of the Chinese community also make cakes for Diwali, for example. Yet, there is still a marked rift between the communities as they do not want to lose their ancestral identity through intermarriage (except in many cases for the Creoles who have mixed ancestry), or their place within hierarchy that has been established since independence, with Hindus at the top and Creoles at the bottom, although Franco-Mauritians remain the wealthiest. English, French and especially Creole are the languages that are used on a daily basis by the majority, but most

individuals are associated with a community through an original ethnic language that almost nobody speaks fluently or frequently.¹²

In Patrick Eisenlohr's words, *'in fact few of these languages are actually used in everyday life, and among them Mauritian Creole is by far the most dominant and is known by practically all Mauritians'* (Eisenlohr 2006: 30).

This paradox highlights the nature of culture in Mauritius: one that is highly mutable and constantly being interrogated by Mauritian authors like Ananda Devi. The Indian and Creole populations of Mauritius have therefore undergone quite different patterns of development. On the one hand the Creoles' jobs as fishermen and low-paid servants did not allow for much social advancement and education remains limited, whilst on the other, Indo-Mauritians have progressed and prospered. Moreover, while the Creoles were forced or chose to adapt to their master's way of living and religion, the Indians' initial marginalization kept them separate and within the cultural and traditional boundaries of their own group. The British policy of letting the immigrant population keep their distinct customs and traditions, which was perpetuated after independence (Eriksen 1994, Mahadeo 1999), ensured that the Indians had the freedom to practise their religion, so much so that temples were built all over the island.

The Indians themselves can be divided into North Indians and South Indians, and subdivided into various communities: Marathis, Gujratis, Biharis, Tamils and Telegus, who each have their own religious practices and cultures.¹³ Hence it is to be expected that India is still considered to be a part of the Indo-Mauritians' life and that political and cultural relations with the subcontinent are preserved. According to the 2000 census, the ethnic population of Mauritius is approximately 52 % Hindu, 15% Muslim, 3 % of Chinese origin and 30 % are classed as

¹² For more analyses of the positioning of language in Mauritius see Lionnet (1993), Hookoomsingh (1993).

¹³ The Muslims came from Bengal but have for long associated themselves to Islam rather than to India, which explains their support of Arabic and Pakistani politics.

‘General population’, that is of either Franco-Mauritian descent or of mixed/mulatto/Creole origin.¹⁴

English is the official language and the primary one of courts and parliament, while most educated Mauritians speak French as their second language.¹⁵ Creole (also referred to as Kreol or morisien) is the language spoken by the vast majority of the population, an estimated 95% according to Prabhu (2007: 55), but it is not valued as a primary language. As a result, a two-tier system of language functionality exists in Mauritius. English, French, and Mauritian Creole are constructed as “secular languages,” while the category, “ancestral languages,” provides the “religious” framework to Mauritian multiculturalism. This daily negotiation between the secular and the religiosity as a site of moral values through language management is a unique feature of Mauritian modernity. Eisenlohr notes that:

Mauritian state institutions encourage the cultivation of diasporic ‘ancestral cultures’ in the context of a wider Mauritian political ideal of ‘unity in diversity’ and ethno-religious even-handedness. These ‘ancestral cultures’ centered on religious traditions were shaped and circumscribed under colonialism, and their cultivation is favored because they are believed to be sites of ‘moral values’ to be instilled in Mauritian citizens. (“Politics”, pg. 397)¹⁶

Like most Mauritian authors, Devi chooses to write in French ‘le français m’est venu tout naturellement en tant que langue d’écriture parallèlement à l’apprentissage de la lecture dans

¹⁴ For more information, see Peter Hawkins, *The Other Hybrid Archipelago* (2007: 5, 9, 13, 98, and 100).

¹⁵ As Miles points out, most Mauritian parents ‘want their children to achieve maximum proficiency in English and French’ (2000: 227), for economic and social motivations, as the current language of globalization is English, and the French language remains privileged. It is also for social, political and economic purposes that the country is a member of both the Commonwealth and ‘La Francophonie’.

¹⁶ Eisenlohr, Patrick. ‘The politics of Diaspora and the Morality of Secularism: Muslim Identities and Islamic Authority in Mauritius.’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12(2006): 395-412

cette langue [...] Je puis ainsi dire que le français a grandi avec moi et en moi et que j'ai grandi avec le français. Il n'y a pas eu d'interrogation à ce sujet ni de conflit personnel' (Devi Interview with Sultan 2001). For her, French remains the language in which she can 'exprimer l'émotion' (ibid). Coming from a certain 'milieu', she believes her Creole is not as complete as the 'Créole des rues' with all the images, constructions and its very 'puissance' (ibid), so that French remains the language she privileges. Thus, while she writes about a variety of characters who sometimes come from the bottom rungs of society, French remains the language that she uses throughout, although 'l'affleurement du Créole a son importance' (ibid).

Devi's text is written in a French that is hermetically separated from the rest of the languages at play in Mauritian society. In this way, the uses of both Indian (Hindi/Bhojpuri) expressions and Creole and their relationship with French in terms of code-mixing and code-switching will be explored in the texts. Creole is used so much in Devi's novels as opposed to *Bhojpuri/Hindi*, which as Lionnet, for instance, underlines, is the language spoken in most villages (Lionnet 1993: 105). In the 'Indian' novels, *Le Voile de Draupadi*, *Pagli* and *L'Arbre fouet*, it is interesting to note that after French, Creole is used most, as opposed to Bhojpuri/Hindi. The latter are only used sporadically. The adoption of Creole in the texts as a 'Mauritian' language, that is the language that is shared by all of Devi's characters, whatever their origins, marks an actual shift from former Hindu allegiances to a homogenizing Creole. It must be stressed that the Mauritian variant of Bhojpuri is also a hybrid language in that it blends Hindi, Creole and Bhojpuri originating from Bihar. Nevertheless, it remains an essentially 'Indian' language, because it is a marker of Hindu identity. Creole, because of its nature as a hybrid language, then becomes the language that reflects the cultural hybridity in Mauritian society, in Devi's texts. Devi's notion of hybridity where she is able to take advantage of 'une telle coïncidence de cultures' and the different canons and traditions that accompany them, is a product of the multicultural society. While the identities are plural on the island in terms of ethnicity, she

conceives the result on the people, including herself, as hybridity, that is, a mixing of the different cultures.

The creative madness is powerful insofar as it can blur reality and fiction for the author who is in the threshold between reason and unreason. Nevertheless, in this in-between space, where she acknowledges her 'hybrid identity' (Bhabha 1994), she realises that '*l'écriture tout ce temps n'était qu'un moyen de pallier la fadeur de ma vie*' (IT: 165). Indeed, this 'hybrid identity' is not lived positively. The author's character, contrary to Daya of Pagli, finds her liberation from the psychological dislocation through writing.

This novel conflates Hindu culture and religion with the violence of superstition, patriarchy and communalism. Hindu masculinity, through the figures of the priest, father and husband, is constructed as an oppressive force that victimizes both Hindu women and Creoles. Despite the cultural and geophysical entities that define this fictional world, Devi's narratives have inspired the interpretation of the world where the "untouchable" in Hindu society and "creole fisherman" in Mauritian society are famous as metaphor of the abject, oppressed and the desperate. In her narratives, this conflation is translated as the sympathetic coupling of the woman victim of a Hindu patriarchal society and marginalized Creole. The woman, consequently, becomes "untouchable" because either a low-caste Hindu or a Creole has defiled her chastity. Thus, in the novel "Pagli" the relationship between a married woman and her lover, the Creole fisherman Zil is represented as the metaphorical union of the island and its desired "other": Zil and Pagli, island and ecstasy, boat and ocean, fish and death."¹⁷ The exclusion and suffering of dishonored Hindu woman and marginalized Creole woman in a Hindu dominated patriarchal society come to represent despair as a universal human condition in Devi's writing.

¹⁷ "Zil et Pagli, l'île et sa folie, le bateau et son océan, le poisson et sa mort" (Devi, Ananda, Pagli 106).

The Hindu protagonist in Ananda Devi's *L'arbre fouet* (1993) summarizes the general assumption:

“Nous avons toujours, dans cette île, été trop préoccupés de la religion. Et cela colore tout. Ce que nous sommes, ce que nous devenons, qui nous aimons, qui nous épousons, comment nous mourons.”¹⁸ (pg.93)

Ananda Devi's texts unfold in a blaze of communal, domestic and sexual violence. Her Mauritius is plagued by the ills of economic globalization and is peopled by “social monsters,” physically and mentally disfigured men, women and children, “untouchables,” poverty-stricken, sexually abused and financially exploited outcasts. In her narratives, Hindu beliefs and practices marginalized, subjugate and violate both men and women of the community, as well as those outside of it. Devi's heroine Daya takes her last breath in the memory of Zil. Pagli is a new woman who tramples the moral codes and conventions to find herself anew and her own feminine desire. Transgressing the laws of patriarchy, Daya gains autonomy of her body without any humiliation.

Daya celebrates her feminine sexuality which has achieved its self-fulfillment through an exotic sexual relationship with Zil. Daya discovers her body, her jouissance and her femininity through her mutual love with Zil. Accused of being responsible for the illness of her son, the protagonist in *Le voile de Draupadi* (1993) confronts the violence of Hindu patriarchy when she is forced to participate in the Hindu ritual of fire walking in order to save her dying child. In *L'arbre fouet* (1993) the narrator's father, a Hindu priest, subjugates his daughter to daily penance for being “ill born” (according to her horoscope she is supposed to have committed parricide in her previous life). When she has sexual intercourse with an “untouchable” to defy

¹⁸ Translation: “We have always been too concerned about religion on this island. And that colours everything. What we are, what we become, who we love, who we marry, how we die.”

him, he ties her to a tree and flogs her for defiling his Brahmin identity. In *Moi L'interdite* (2000), Mouna born in a Hindu family with the unfortunate, physical disfigurement of a harelip is looked upon as an inauspicious member and sentenced to a life of exclusion from all physical and family activities and banished to the attic. In *Le Sari Vert* (2009), a Hindu doctor abuses his young wife for not fitting his image of the ideal Hindu wife and mother and finally sets her on fire.

All these novels conflate Hindu culture and religion with the violence of superstition, patriarchy, and communalism. Hindu masculinity, through the figures of the priest, father and husband, is constructed as an oppressive force that victimizes both Hindu women and Creoles. Like the current generation of African writers who do not want to be categorized as crusaders in a fight against social and political injustice but desire to make contributions on their own terms, Ananda Devi's writings through her novels display a strong commitment to a creative refashioning of postcolonial literary aesthetics. Hinduism in her novels is represented as an ancestral culture with its roots in a distant spiritual location in an "idea of India," as a space "outside of time" and as "a country without proper name."¹⁹ Devi experiments often with time and space drawing inspiration from cyclical temporalities, a core feature of several classical Indian stories. Although Devi's works make this historical and cultural connection at fictional and narrative levels, her modernist writing disconnects India and Mauritius through a literary separation between tradition and spirituality.

¹⁹ "hors du temps" and pays sans nom véritable" (Devi, *Indian Tango*, 99,44)

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